

I

RECEIVING

DOES TRUTH EXIST? IS IT REAL OR IDEAL? CAN THERE BE SPIRITUAL as well as natural truths? These primordial questions are surely now superseded by the concerns of philosophy, whether Analytic or Continental. Or have these questions now begun to return?

1.1 Background to the Problem

For many recent philosophers, ‘truth’ has been considered primarily as an object of knowledge, and sometimes as a property of knowing. For a small number, it has been considered a property of being. We can refer to the position that truth is an object of knowledge as an ‘epistemological’ approach, and to the idea that it is a property of both knowing and being as an ‘ontological’ approach. The former is characteristic of modern philosophy; the latter, of ancient and medieval philosophy.

The transition from an ontological to an epistemological approach took place in part because of the exacerbation of traditions of scepticism reaching back to ancient Greek thought, concerning the possibility of a link between human knowledge and how things really are. This exacerbation took the form, for René Descartes, of no longer merely doubting the degree of our knowledge of reality, but of initially doubting whether we have cognitive access to the world at all.¹ Although Descartes eventually affirmed such access through his metaphysics of the spirit and of the infinite, Immanuel Kant later acceded to the original extreme scepticism in a qualified form: one knows with precision the

¹ René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Myles Burnyeat, ‘Idealism and Greek Philosophy: What Descartes Saw and Berkeley Missed’, *Philosophical Review* 90 (1982), 3–40.

appearances of things to one, but one remains ignorant of ‘things in themselves’.²

The ‘epistemological’ approach, in the wake of Descartes and Kant, is rooted in a new mode of response to scepticism which does not begin by assuming the link of mind to reality, or the ontological character of truth. Indeed, Augustine, who in some ways anticipated Cartesian introspection, never doubted such a link.³ But modern thought begins with the isolated *cogito*, however later and variously modified, and so with the alternative certainties of (1) appearing to oneself in thought, and (2) the way other things appear to oneself through one’s self-awareness.

Epistemology, however, faces two problems. The first problem is the division between rationalism and idealism, on the one hand, and empiricism, on the other. For a rationalist position, truth is linked to the structures of one’s mind; for an empiricist position, truth is derived from the evidence to the mind of the senses.

The second problem of epistemology is more drastic: the tension between an emphasis on ‘reason’, in the broadest sense, encompassing both rationalism and empiricism, and a radical naturalism, associated (rightly or wrongly) with David Hume, which could call the nature of reason into question, if one’s mind is taken to be determined by immanent, rational processes. The seventeenth-century philosopher Benedict de Spinoza can be seen to combine both rationalism and naturalism, but not without the construction of an immanentist, pantheistic metaphysical theology, to guarantee that nature and logic were both equally ‘basic’.⁴

Such naturalism might suggest a return to an ontological approach to truth, but this may turn out to be at the expense of the idea of truth altogether, because it involves abandoning transcendence and the idea of a spiritual origin of reality. If spirit is just one aspect of an immanent world, as for Spinoza, might it not more plausibly be regarded as epiphenomenal to matter? In such a case, thought and truth may not be seen as realities, but rather as human illusions or flitting figments.

One can argue that twentieth-century philosophy has remained within the scope of the subjective, epistemological approach, but with many different permutations. However, there is a twist in the tale, as we shall see below. This period of philosophy sought to ‘neutralise’ philosophical debates between rationalism and empiricism, and between rationalism (in a broader sense) and

² Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as a Science*, trans Gary Hatfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

³ See Michael Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2003).

⁴ Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1955).

naturalism. The supposedly opposed Analytic and Continental traditions of thought sought to do this in different ways, but in both cases, one observes a turn to ‘logic’, rather than to the direct question of what pertains in one’s mind. This turn to logic is often associated with ‘anti-psychologism’.⁵ The sphere of logic can be considered more ‘objective’, but not with the lapidary objectivity of physical things ‘out there’ in the world. The claim tended to be made that philosophical problems are really matters of true or false reasoning: whether of reasoning to do with the logic of sentences, in the case of the Analytic tradition, or the logical structure of the way things appear to the onlooker, in the case of phenomenology. Once this is assumed, traditional philosophical problems of a ‘metaphysical’ kind either (1) fade away as meaningless, or (2) prove intrinsically irresolvable, in the tradition of Kant, or (3) are resolved, one by one, but not necessarily with the ideological consistency one might have hoped.

Here one can mention Michael Dummett, an Analytic philosopher, for whom logic points to realism in some respects, and to anti-realism in other respects. If knowledge is taken to be justified true belief, and not an outright contact or collision with ‘what is really the case’, then one can know, according to Gottlob Frege’s principle of ‘bivalence’. This is the principle that a claimed meaning is either true or false, but not that there are real ‘truths’ which hold beyond one’s modes of apprehension, that is, unless one is prepared to bring God into the equation.⁶ The claim was made within twentieth-century philosophy that one can agree about how truth works in logic without having to decide whether it amounts to a matter of knowledge, or also to a matter of being; or even whether it originates from a priori structures or from sensation. In a second step, one can use *logic* of different kinds in order to adjudicate the traditional philosophical arguments between realism and idealism, or alternatively, rule them out of court, or construct a critical ontology on the strict basis of the way in which things are disclosed to one, as in the case of Martin Heidegger.⁷ Such an ontology may even be seen as transcending the opposition between realism and idealism.

One can note that Analytic and Continental philosophical traditions developed alternative logical tools in order to sustain the new preference

⁵ See Martin Kusch, *Psychologism: A Case Study in the Sociology of Philosophical Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1995).

⁶ Michael Dummett, *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); *Thought and Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 78–80, 96–109.

⁷ Gottlob Frege, ‘On Sense and Meaning’, in *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, ed. Peter Geach and Max Black (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 56–78; Clare Ortiz Hill, *Rethinking Identity and Metaphysics: On the Foundations of Analytic Philosophy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

for initial neutrality, the novel, vauntedly rigorous mode of combating scepticism. Gottlob Frege has often been taken to have inaugurated the Analytic approach on the basis of a new kind of formal logic which was better able to handle modifications of an initial statement, in terms of quantifiers and relations: a ‘predicate calculus’. With this instrument, he hoped to get rid of the idea that one must think of qualities in ontological terms, as mysteriously attached to substances. One can interpret this approach both as a programme of intensified nominalism and as a modification of the Kantian transcendentalist legacy.

Even if one were to insist that Frege caused a modification in an already existent British Analytic tradition, originating with G. E. Moore, the dominance of logic holds, though in a more ‘Hegelian’, and so post-Kantian metaphysical, rather than ‘Kantian’ manner. This is because Moore, and at times Russell and Wittgenstein, in his wake, sought to outwit the gap between thought and reality, by identifying the latter with propositions, while denying, against the British Idealists, their mentally subjective and holistically predetermined character. Because of this denial, in Moore’s case, perhaps more radically than for Frege, the traditional ontology of qualities ‘attaching’ to substances is undone, in keeping with the abandoning of the primacy of a subject–predicate logic at the cognitive level. In Moore’s case, however, and variously in the cases of G. F. Stout, the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, Frank Ramsey and Russell, in some phases, the denial of the contrast between a ‘particular’ substance and a ‘universal’ attribute was so extreme as in effect to problematise the pertinence of the realist/nominalist contrast altogether.⁸

Edmund Husserl, however, elaborated a new form of transcendental logic, or ‘phenomenology’, which would deal with the objective structures of how we perceive the world, bracketing questions of how the world is in itself.⁹ He took the opposite course to Frege, conservatively preserving, at the transcendental level, a categorial dualism, more so than Moore, by proposing that one can only know substances by way of their manifest qualities or ‘aspects’ and that one never gets to the end of an account of what these aspects are. Within Analytic philosophy, as Stephen Mulhall has pointed out, the later

⁸ Fraser MacBride, *On the Genealogy of Universals: The Metaphysical Origins of Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 24–62.

⁹ Edmund Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology*, trans. William P. Alston and George Nakhnikian, introduction by G. Nakhnikian (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973); *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorian Cairns (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1999); Christian Delacampagne, *A History of Philosophy in the Twentieth Century*, trans. M. B. Devoise (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 12–60.

Wittgenstein took an approach to ‘aspects’ that is closer to phenomenology than to Frege.¹⁰

In both cases, one observes a break with nineteenth-century idealism; truth is not something *constituted by the structures of subjective mind*. Questions of ‘truth’ came to hover in a kind of middle domain which gestured towards the ontological but did not desert the primary ground of the epistemological. It is for this reason that Quentin Meillassoux has described this compromise as ‘correlationist’: there is no pure idealism, because one’s thoughts are supposed to ‘correlate’ with reality insofar as it is ‘given’ to one.¹¹ But how is this possible, one might ask, metaphysically speaking, and how does this relate to the naturalistic assumptions of physical science?

Here, one notes that the earliest phases of Analytic thought sought to circumvent such issues in ways that anticipate the demands for a purer realism in the twenty-first century, as we shall see later in this book.

Somewhat akin to the early Husserl and his precursors, Moore considered, against empiricism, that an analysis of the structure of one’s awareness shows that it intends external realities, beginning with sensory awareness.¹² Partly for this reason, it can be immediately identified with propositional structures, built up from atomic conceptual units, and no issue of correlation would seem to arise. Moreover, because human thought is radically turned outwards and is open to a presumed empirical contingency, any projection of an a priori Kantian distinction of subject and predicate upon the world as the difference of substance and attribute is disallowed.¹³

For Moore, as for others, this was taken to be a consequence of the embrace of a more relational and fluid logic, after Frege and Peirce. It was assumed that the earlier dualist ontology was the consequence of the projection upon reality of an Aristotelian logic of subject and predicate, now outdated. One could suggest that this is turned historically back to front: because it remained ontological in compass, pertaining to how reality exists inside one’s thoughts, Aristotelian logic favoured a structure that seemed to mirror everyday reality, though it was clear that there was a shifting penumbra of ‘topical’ argumentation, which some pre-Fregean attempts sought to systematise; for example, in the diverse cases of later medieval theories of

¹⁰ Stephen Mulhall, *On Being in the World: Wittgenstein and Heidegger on Seeing Aspects* (London: Routledge, 2015).

¹¹ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2009).

¹² MacBride, *On the Genealogy of Universals*, 24–42.

¹³ MacBride, *On the Genealogy of Universals*, 43–86; G. E. Moore, ‘The Nature of Judgement’, *Mind* 8 (1899), 176–93.

presuppositions, and the work of Ramon Lull, Petrus Ramus and G. W. Leibniz. In these instances, as for Frege, the assumption that the fluid regions of dialectics can be systematised into a *mathesis* which will hold the key to reality perforce involves the unspoken assumption that ontology should follow upon logic, rather than vice versa. It is also attended by the explicit ‘anti-psychologistic’ assumption that logic is not about the way things are within conscious thinking, doubly begging the question of the truth of the earlier modes of realist philosophies. The prime ontological pertinence of the new relational logic is rendered conceivable by the more directly metaphysical explorations of A. N. Whitehead, arguing for the categorial primacy of event, process and relating in the realm of real, beyond logical calculus. At both the logical and the ontological levels, the question of which scheme gains sway, the static or the fluid, remains perhaps both open and undecidable.

But whichever may pertain here, Moore and his successors recognised three problems arising from their philosophical outlook, which later caused him to modify his position. First, in general, the identification of realities ‘out there’ with thoughts ‘in here’ seems to repeat the Idealist flouting of common sense. It would seem to disallow the Kantian truth, against Leibniz, that real things may be otherwise identical but distinguished by their spatial and temporal location. Secondly, if reality consists in propositions, what prevents false propositions from being as real as true ones? What prevents ‘Desdemona loves Cassio’, to cite Russell’s example, from being as true as ‘Cassio loves Desdemona’, if truth is given in the holistic coherence of the three terms of a proposition?¹⁴ Even though Moore, as for Wittgenstein later, and somewhat in his wake, wished to reduce analysis to tautology, rendering logical variation an empirical matter, this seemed to be threatened by his identification of reality with the ‘one category’ of the proposition. In the third place, as Wittgenstein contended against Russell, though in relation to a different theory, a refusal to allow an ultimate distinction between subject and predicate, substance and property, runs the risk of rendering nonsense-phrases and nonsense-sentences valid, in such a way that ‘a wall blank’ is supposed to make as much sense as a ‘blank wall’, or ‘the wilts rose’ as much as ‘the rose wilts’.¹⁵

Moore and Russell later moved to a representationalist, more epistemological and correlationist position. In order to safeguard the difference between things and thoughts, truths and falsities, sense and nonsense, Moore began to

¹⁴ Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* [1912] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 124–37.

¹⁵ MacBride, *On the Genealogy of Universals*, 43–182.

re-admit a categorial dualism of substance and predicate, and to insist on their difference from the category of relation. Faced with F. H. Bradley's problems of attachment and resulting regress – *if a is in attachment A, or relation R, to b, then what relates or attaches a and b to A or R, etc.*, and so on – he resorted to a more Platonic response, in conscious imitation of Plato's own defence of participation against the 'third man' argument. Universal predicates are of a different and quasi-eternal mode of 'being' from ordinary existent things, and can be immediately identified with them, disallowing aporetic regress. In this way, in his second phase, Moore allowed a 'vertical' derivation of relative temporal consistency, in such a manner that seemed to appeal to transcendence in order to avoid either an immanentist monism or an adventitious immanent variety. Later, Alfred North Whitehead arguably fused elements of Moore's first and second phases, by seeking a greater ontological balance of fixity and alteration, and an invocation of Platonically eternal, rather than sustained, immanent Aristotelian substantive continuity, so as to account for temporal consistencies.¹⁶

With similar motivations, Russell shifted from an ontology of propositions to one of varying 'facts' to which one's judgements or 'understandings', to avoid psychologism, and not one's propositions, correspond in varying relations, making no absolute semantic distinction between thing and concept. A common-sense view of the referring character of one's ordinary expressions was rescued and yet qualified through his doctrine of propositions as 'incomplete symbols' in need of endless analytic qualification in order to be rendered representationally adequate.¹⁷

Russell was aware of the problems with this new stance, which have preoccupied philosophy up to the present day.¹⁸ First, it seems that no referring proposition of the understanding will ever be complete, for to be so it must be self-referring, and this perforce engenders paradox, as with the well-known instance of the Cretan liar.¹⁹ Secondly, knowledge as correspondence is a binary relation which nonetheless implies the operation of a ternary perspective in order to ensure that it holds good, and yet which the immediate and binary perspective withholds: how does one check that one is really looking through a window except by looking through it again, and

¹⁶ MacBride, *On the Genealogy of Universals*, 107–28. One can note the persistence of a Platonic lineage in Cambridge from the post-Reformation onwards.

¹⁷ MacBride, *On the Genealogy of Universals*, 63–86; Bertrand Russell, 'On Denoting', *Mind*, New Series 14 (1905), 479–93.

¹⁸ For the discussion of Russell below, see MacBride, *On the Genealogy of Universals*, 153–82.

¹⁹ A. R. Anderson, 'St Paul's Epistle to Titus', in *The Paradox of the Liar*, ed. R. L. Martin (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Co., 1970), 1–11.

how can one overtake this regress of looking through the window and draw it to a close. Thirdly, there is the question of which ontological units anchor correspondence? In order to escape the aforementioned problems of holistic confusion of sense with nonsense, truth with falsity, Russell was inclined towards an epistemological atomism. For example, purely mediating external relations ‘between’ things – *the R between a and b* – must be reduced to non-reversible definite occurrences, and attached properties as in *aR* and *Rb*, and ‘permutational’ phrases such as ‘*b depends on a*’, when it might be the other way around, to ‘non-permutational’ ones, such as ‘*a is similar to b*’. Yet Russell was also aware that the reduction of relation to predicate and to irreversibility raised the spectre of Idealist purely ‘internal’ relations, and of a denial of genuine interactions, tending to engender either a windowless monadology or a monism, given that the persisting relational character of predicative attachment seems to give rise to Bradley’s regress. The only way out of this awkwardness seems to be to say that the infinite is all, in reality, an unrelated whole.²⁰ Equally, he was aware that the same reduction tended to remove the apparently real reversibility of symmetrical relations, as well as the causal directionality and unilateral character of asymmetrical relations, as in ‘*a causes b*’ but not vice versa, or ‘*a precedes b*’ and ‘*a is greater than b*’.

In order to be released from this tangle, Russell embraced a more Fregean perspective which enabled him to combine an atomised ontology with a recognition of more holistic senses, directions and relations, at the level of sense rather than of reference. This was allied with his view that by allowing that a proposition was of another ‘type’ to a thing, one could supposedly avert recursive paradox, through a policing of language which would remove one’s quotidian confused tendency to speak about concepts as though they were fully-fledged ontological realities with attendant density and weight.

By way of this embrace, Russell bequeathed an Analytic legacy which sustained a logicist version of Kantian dualism: universal senses analytically pick out and organise synthesised empirical particulars. This version remains confined within the problematic of correlation.

Russell remained somewhat drawn back to the original Analytic programme of a minimised transcendental commitment, and an empiricised logic, linked with an open-ended categorisation and not to be divorced from the process of scientific discovery. For this reason, and in order to take account of the problems with respect to truth to which this programme,

²⁰ Guido Bonino, ‘Relations in British Idealism’, and Federico Perelda, ‘Russell and the Question of Relations’, in *Relations: Ontology and Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Daniele Bertini and Damiano Migliorini (Verona: Mimesis International, 2018), 27–39, 41–57.

as we have seen, could give rise, he started to formulate what would become the ‘picture theory’ articulated by Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.²¹

In that work, reality is presented as composed of facts, of ‘all that is the case’, and not of propositions. However, at the same time, propositions are also facts, and the core of the ‘hieroglyphic’ theory of knowledge as picturing is that some realities may be deployed adequately to picture other realities.²² The problems of propositional ontology and of representational epistemology are thereby supposedly dispatched. Because some facts, at a particular instance and on a particular occasion, picture and other facts do not, a common-sense view of the difference between being and thinking is salvaged. Since a falsity is a possibility entertained within picturing reality, but not exemplified within pictured reality, falsity is not ontologically validated. Because a thought is structurally isomorphic with the thought-about, there is no problem of representation, or binary-triadic *aporia*: facts are not bare ‘things’ and they do not exit ‘logical space’.²³ Similarly, the thought-about half of reality will disconfirm that Desdemona loves Cassio. And because the Fregean contrast of thing and concept, reference and sense has now been sidestepped, Wittgenstein is no longer committed to an empiricistic ontology of pure atoms or isolated particulars. Rather, analysis must terminate in ‘simples’, as it will otherwise go on indefinitely, and there will be no truth-claims or ascertained truth at all. But he is committed to denying an a priori predetermination of what these simples consist in, as well as the dualistic contrast of subject and predicate. All sorts of primary and irreducible things, attachments, relations and asymmetrical directions merely wait to be discovered. Nonsense is ruled out, not because the places of subject and predicate cannot be reversed; they can, because wisdom can be the subject of Socrates, as well as vice versa, as Ramsey showed.²⁴ Rather, it is because all knowledge is knowledge of how things occur in this world, including the ‘simple’ patterns of their general occurrence.

However, there were good reasons for Wittgenstein to abandon the dazzlingly simplified philosophy of the *Tractatus*. He had not escaped all of Russell’s dilemmas. First, if logic is empirical, then ultimately simple things must be logically independent of one another. If this is not the case,

²¹ MacBride, *On the Genealogy of Universals*, 183–88.

²² MacBride, *On the Genealogy of Universals*, 188–202; Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988), 4.106.

²³ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 1.13.

²⁴ MacBride, *On the Genealogy of Universals*, 203–33.

as Wittgenstein, though not Ramsey,²⁵ came to suspect – in the case of colour-phenomena, for example – Hegelian and other shadows lurk, concerning the inherent logic and meaningfulness of reality itself, if one is to avoid Kantian or Fregean transcendentalism, with their possibly sceptical upshots. The Bradleian problem of relation may also return to view, if one is no longer content with the *Tractatus* account of things as directly linked by unmediated chains. The question of how things hold together and are causally connected is here arguably sidestepped.

The factual reality of propositions, moreover, does not overcome the problem of a duality between representing and other facts. Unless one has an ontological theory of a mediating factor of *eidos* or form between the two, one must either deny the duality, after early Moore, or Wittgenstein's 'showing' of the identity of the picture must still run up against the problem of how to check the reliability of a binary relation. If a thought or a sentence were merely a hieroglyph, one would be able to do away with it, just as one can look directly at a house, rather than a picture of a house. Yet to see a house, one has need of the idea of a house, in order to pick it out from the array of other things, or identify it as a house, as for Frege with his 'context principle',²⁶ and so the two cannot be compared in an independent fashion. In such a way, the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* had not quite escaped dogmatic correlationism, and it is not clear that his later transcendentalist-pragmatism escaped from it either. Rather, in order to allow that thoughts are 'out there' in the world, and yet to escape the correlationist problematic, one would have to go in Whitehead's direction of allowing that factual realities are actively and responsively 'prehending', and that one's own thinking, in continuity with them, is more a matter of conscious reception, interaction and creative response than of passive picturing.²⁷

1.2 Analytic Philosophers on Truth

Despite the complexity of its origins, and its initially more realist and metaphysical leanings, as I have summarised in the foregoing, a great deal of Analytic philosophy, from the late 1920s onwards, came to be dominated by the Fregean recension.

²⁵ MacBride, *On the Genealogy of Universals*, 203–333; F. P. Ramsey, 'Universals', *Mind* 34 (1925), 401–17.

²⁶ MacBride, *On the Genealogy of Universals*, 144; Gottlob Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, trans. J. L. Austin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1950).

²⁷ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1985), 219–80.